



PRESS RELEASE

House National Security Committee

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OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN FLOYD SPENCE HEARING ON IRAQ

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Today the committee will review the issue of U.S. policy toward Iraq and, in particular, whether the Administration is executing that policy successfully.

President Clinton contends that we are. Immediately following the recent cruise missile strikes on Iraq, the President went on national television to claim that the mission had been accomplished and that Iraq was "strategically worse off." But a different and contradictory picture emerged very quickly. Just last week, John Deutch, Director of Central Intelligence, testified before the Senate that "in the past six weeks, [Saddam Hussein] has gotten stronger politically in the region."

Director Deutch's contrary assessment seems to reflect an Administration in disarray and, in my opinion, is a stark admission that the Administration's policy toward Iraq is failing.

Over the course of the past month, Saddam Hussein has won three important victories. First, he has greatly strengthened his position within Iraq, not only by consolidating gains in the north but also by crushing internal opposition. Second, as the broad Desert Storm coalition and in particular, the alliance of Gulf Arab states fractures, Saddam stands much taller in the region. Third, by taking bold and ultimately successful action in the face of strong American warnings, Saddam has called into question American leadership and credibility relative to our critical role as the principle guarantor of the world's energy supplies.

Consider what each of Saddam's victories means. Within Iraq, Saddam has secured his northern flank and in the process, has badly damaged the internal opposition to his regime. The Administration claims that the Iraqi opposition, led by the Kurds in northern Iraq, proved too hard to keep united. While this is not a surprise, neither is it an excuse. We have lost five years of investment in our efforts to contain Iraq in the north.

Saddam's second victory is even greater. He has cracked the American-led coalition that won the Gulf War and which has been the key to our post-war policy of containment. The silence of our allies is deafening. Saudi Arabia, the keystone of our Gulf strategy and the primary staging base for our military operations over Iraq, is now a more reluctant partner. Turkey, another key regional ally and member of NATO, is also less enthusiastic about hosting American troops on its soil. Jordan, persuaded by our victory in the Gulf War to make an historic peace with Israel, nonetheless refused to temporarily base U.S. warplanes on its soil. Even Kuwait, completely defenseless against Iraq without U.S. protection, has only reluctantly agreed to what should have been a routine augmentation of forces.

France is beginning to hedge its bets in anticipation of reviving its historic ties to Baghdad. Likewise, Russia seeks to regain its traditional influence in the region. And only Great Britain is willing to participate in the expanded air operation over southern Iraq. In sum, the international support to contain Iraq continues to crumble.

Without the strong support of these allies, our ability to operate in the region is greatly limited. After the damage Saddam suffered and recovered from in the Gulf War, cruise missile attacks against a handful of air defense radars are meaningless. Extending no-fly zones means little against a pitiful Iraqi air force, and proved no deterrent whatsoever against Saddam's army in the north.

The overall result has been to present Saddam with his third and greatest victory: from the rest of the world's perception, American leadership and credibility in a region of vital national security interest is now in question. Our pinprick response to Saddam's aggression in the north has strained our own coalition without hurting Saddam, either militarily or diplomatically. Iraq only has to repair some air defense sites while the U.S. must try to repair a five-year coalition policy of containment.

If the President perceives this as "success" and believes that Saddam Hussein is strategically worse off, I would hate to know what his definition of "failure" is. Indeed, it is not Saddam who is worse off, it is the United States. It is the United States that now finds itself with more military challenges. It is the United States that now has fewer strategic options. It is the United States that is now confronting the very real prospect of a strategic policy failure of some magnitude.

I hope today's hearing will help us understand in greater detail our policy with regard to Iraq.